

Theory class rules of thumb

it is very important for the students to read as many primary essays as possible rather than summaries, commentaries, synthesis, excerpts, etc. They will be reading that other stuff anyway on their own.

They should be required to very carefully and precisely write a fair and accurate short summary of several major articles, and share them with the other students: eg. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. From this they learn (from having to read it slowly and carefully several times) how different theoretical essays are actually rhetorically and logically constructed, support their arguments with reasons and example, etc.

I have usually started the class with Benjamin's Work of Art essay and gone through the entire argument step by step so they see just how rich and complex such a piece can be. That provides a model of what I then expect them to do when they read a theoretical essay.

All of them should have to do one complete textual analysis breakdown of a scene: that is a shot by shot close analysis that accounts for all elements of editing, mise en scene, sound and music track etc. They need to understand the problems and danger of making hasty and careless assumptions based on casual or unworked out viewing. (professionally fatal) Probably the best guide to this is Bordwell's book on analysis of the narrative film (which they don't have to master at this point, but should by the time of their quals)

In other words, theory should help us actually understand concrete examples, not just put forward vague and (unprovable) assertions

Students often pick up some dumb attitudes or half-thoughts from their peers or the passing remark of someone who seems authoritative or having been powerfully enlightened by some essay or chapter or book just assume this is the total answer. Along the way they lose the need for constant self scrutiny of basic assumptions, an understanding that theorists actually evolve over time (and often have rather long careers), etc. (e.g., Judith Butler has, over time, changed or clarified some of her basic views in response to very smart criticisms by other critics—to her credit) However, you will still see young writers quoting something or other from early Butler as if it were locked in stone truth or dogma.. It is damn hard to be subtle and nuanced in using theory, but it is necessary to get respect in the field.

Film theory actually evolves, over time. Old questions are not usually lost forever but reappear in different ways as the actual media field changes. Some questions are perennial: realism.

I sometimes remark to students (so they don't become too much little smarty pants "theorists" and try to lord it over others) that media theory is a desperate attempt to catch

up with the evolving and expanding complexity of media practice. It sometimes gets close, but it never overtakes the object of study.

A good theory must be complete (account for all the actual things it is trying to generalize about; you can't have left overs or odd exceptions, etc.) and it must be elegant (not have to endlessly construct new subsets to account for this or that or contradictions or exceptions.)